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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000674

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MLS,  
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2019

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SUBJECT: BURMA: ECONOMIST SHARES VIEWS ON ASSK, ECONOMIC  
PRIORITIES FOR DIALOGUE

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Classified By: Economic Officer Marc Porter for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

1. (C) U Myint, a prominent Burmese economist, is cautiously seeking a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) and plans to advise she shift her focus from politics to socio-economic themes. U Myint sees economic development as the greatest challenge facing Burma and an issue on which ASSK can have a beneficial impact without being perceived by the generals as a threat. Moreover, U Myint believes that given the state of the economy and ASSK's lack of experience running a government, the military will need to retain some control over society until institutions are rebuilt. We comment that in the Burma environment, economic issues are intensely political. We also note the military's unimpressive track record on governance. End Summary.

Seeking meeting with ASSK

2. (C) In a September 29 meeting, retired United Nations economist U Myint (see para 7 for bio info) told Econoff he is seeking a private meeting with ASSK to advise she abandon head-on political confrontation with the Burmese regime and shift to a socio-economic focus. If granted access to ASSK, U Myint said he plans to advise she change tacks in confronting the military. He is convinced she cannot succeed in effecting change if her focus remains exclusively political. The constitution is a reality and the 2010 elections will happen; so to battle against them is counterproductive, U Myint said. In his view, a longer term strategy should focus first on improving basic economic conditions for Burma's citizens.

3. (C) U Myint and ASSK initially began a dialogue on economic themes during a less restrictive period of her house arrest during the Khin Nyunt era. At the time, U Myint also was informally advising the circle of military officers close to Khin Nyunt. Through unnamed intermediaries, presumably National League for Democracy (NLD) members, U Myint claims he has recently exchanged messages with ASSK and says each

wants to re-start their earlier dialogue. He added that the last exchange was about a month ago, and at the time ASSK told him she needs to "finish" her appeal and have access to her party's leadership before pushing for a meeting with him.

(Note: An appeal judgment is expected October 2. End note.) Separately, P/E Chief heard from a Western diplomatic contact that ASSK is seeking a meeting with U Myint.

What would he say to ASSK?

14. (C) In U Myint's view, addressing economic stresses on society is first priority as those stresses are approaching critical levels. He plans to suggest five broad economic areas on which ASSK should focus: poverty reduction, humanitarian relief, education, health, and the environment. These are areas where U Myint believes the generals could conceivably stomach ASSK's involvement. Moreover, meaningful progress on these issues would serve to boost ASSK's already high popularity. U Myint stated that given the extent of damage to the country's institutions and the tenuous nature of most people's livelihoods, ASSK and the NLD by themselves currently lack the capacity to solve Burma's economic problems and form a functional government. In his view, the military will be needed in the short and medium term to maintain order as the nation rebuilds.

Advice to the West

15. (C) U Myint cautioned that foreigners (presumably Westerners) should try to keep ASSK at a distance. He thinks public (or even private but known to the GOB) interaction between ASSK and outsiders undermines her by reinforcing

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military fears that she is a foreign pawn advancing foreign interests.

Comment

16. (C) U Myint's suggestion that ASSK should focus on economic rather than political issues begs the reality that in poverty-stricken and mismanaged Burma economic problems are political indictments. We would be surprised if the generals would find an ASSK emphasis on correcting economic flaws any more palatable than an emphasis on "political" themes. U Myint's belief that the military will need to play a continuing security role during any transition is surely true. ASSK herself has acknowledged as much. The important issue is how much continuing role the military would play in choosing the nation's political leaders and in day-to-day governance.

Biographic information

17. (C) Biographic information: U Myint worked for the Burmese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and for the UN for many years before retiring. He continues to hold seminars on economic themes and delivers lectures to mid-level military officers at the National Defense University, and worked on the Burmese translation of the original Post-Nargis Joint Assessment. He has also, at times, provided economic advice to prominent opposition leaders. His family is well-connected and his brother is a retired Burmese ambassador.

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